The 'Don't Lose Lukashenko' Approach: Kyiv's (Non-) Strategic Ambiguity Toward the Belarusian Opposition

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After the regime of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko provided logistical support to the Kremlin in its war of aggression against Ukraine launched in February 2022, one might have expected the Ukrainian government to seek closer cooperation with the Belarusian opposition in exile. However, even though both sides had now seemingly come to share a common enemy, closer cooperation failed to materialize. On the contrary, Kyiv has avoided associating with the Belarusian exiled opposition, led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. The recent release of 123 Belarusian political prisoners by the Lukashenko regime on December 13, 2025, 114 of whom were exiled via Ukrainian territory, again demonstrates that a functioning communication channel between Kyiv and Minsk remains in place. Simultaneously, Kyiv now seems to be signaling its readiness to extend an olive branch to Belarusian dissidents.

Whom to Dance With

In mid-October 2022, the Ukrainian online newspaper *European Pravda* hosted a lively debate to discuss Kyiv's approach toward the Belarusian opposition in exile and the Lukashenko regime in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in which Minsk acted as a co-aggressor by allowing Moscow to use its territory as a staging ground for the invasion. The main views in the discussion were represented, on the one hand, by Bohdan Yaremenko, chair of the Ukrainian parliament's Committee on Foreign Policy and Interparliamentary Cooperation, and on the other hand, by Yurii Panchenko, editor of *European Pravda*.

Yaremenko argued that it was appropriate for Kyiv to rely on Belarusian political actors who posed a real threat to the Lukashenko regime. He portrayed the Tsikhanouskaya-led exiled Belarusian opposition as ineffective and powerless, owing to their exile and their resulting lack of influence on Belarusian domestic and foreign policy. Yaremenko said Kyiv ought increasingly to support the so-called Kastus Kalinouski Regiment (KKR), a paramilitary group comprising exiled Belarusians that is fighting alongside the Ukrainian

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armed forces against the Russian army. The MP argued that Kyiv's task, therefore, is to transform the KKR from a militant group into a political party.

Panchenko argued that Yaremenko's approach was ill considered, with three inherent downsides. First, Kyiv could further divide and thus weaken the Belarusian opposition in exile (including both the "political wing" of the Belarusian opposition—represented by the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus led by Tsikhanouskaya and the Belarusian Coordination Council—and the armed wing—represented by the KKR). Second, this could have fatal consequences for future relations between Ukraine and a post-Lukashenko Belarus, because ordinary Belarusians might perceive Ukrainian support for the KKR as foreign imposition of a particular political model or external interference. It would resemble the Kremlin's approach toward its so-called "near abroad." Third, it would damage Ukraine's international image. Especially in Western democracies, Ukraine's soft power has increased significantly as it has fought back against Russia. Panchenko said that Kyiv should not risk losing that advantage.

The debate is now more than three years old. A careful analysis of Kyiv's Belarus policy reveals that, before mid-2024, the Yaremenko approach prevailed in many aspects of Ukrainian foreign policy. Since then, however, Kyiv has seemed to prioritize maintaining the current balance of power in Belarusian domestic politics. The question is: What accounts for Kyiv's ambiguity toward the exiled Belarusian opposition and its main figures?

The Belarusian Opposition's 'Don't Lose Putin' Moment in 2020

During the mass protests against the fraudulent August 2020 presidential election in Belarus, Kyiv concluded that leading Belarusian opposition figures had failed sufficiently to distance themselves from the Kremlin. They were in fact trying not to antagonize Moscow, careful not to create the impression that the protests have an anti-Kremlin character. It was also a preemptive effort by the democratic forces in Belarus to prevent Moscow from participating in the crackdown on the protests, something Russian President Vladimir Putin had declared his willingness to do in September 2020. For a long time, Tsikhanouskaya had made only extremely vague statements on the issue of Crimea's annexation by the Kremlin, and in September 2020, she declared that Crimea was "de jure Ukrainian" but "de facto Russian." Kyiv viewed this statement critically.

Other leading Belarusian opposition figures at the time also had a somewhat mixed reputation in Ukraine. Viktor Babaryka, the former head of Belgazprombank, a subsidiary of Russia's Gazprom, who became a presidential candidate, is often alleged to have ties to the Kremlin. The same reputation in Ukraine also hangs over his chief of staff during the 2020 presidential election campaign, Maria Kalesnikava, who later became a prominent Belarusian opposition figure. Babaryka and Kalesnikava were held as political prisoners in Belarus from June 2020 and September 2020, respectively (an indication of the sometimes-problematic relationship between Lukashenko and Putin), until they were

released in the abovementioned December 2025 political prisoner release. They again made headlines with their very ambiguous, evasive statements regarding the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

Only after the start of the war, which was strongly condemned by Tsikhanouskaya and her supporters, did the Belarusian democratic forces in exile gradually adopt a clear stance against Moscow. However, the administration of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky did not change its Belarus policy.

Different Domestic Political Backdrops Result in Misunderstanding

Domestic political developments in Ukraine are equally relevant. In both 2004–2005 and 2013–2014, Ukrainian civil society successfully protested against the ruling political elites.

When Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak criticized the Nobel Committee on X for awarding the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize not only to the Ukrainian Center for Civil Liberties, but also to then-imprisoned Belarusian human rights activist Ales Bialiatski and the Russian human rights organization Memorial, this reflected Ukraine's skepticism toward the alleged powerlessness of both Belarusian and Russian opposition movements—after all, the logic goes, the people of Ukraine have already proven twice that mass protests can bring about a change of regime.

However, unlike in Ukraine, the Belarusian political system lacked opposition actors and parties that could have effectively mobilized their supporters against the government at moments of key domestic political transformations. Indeed, there are significant, systemic differences between—in political science terms—the "defective democracy" in Ukraine and the personalist autocracy in Belarus. These directly affect the mobilization capacity of the respective opposition forces.

Kyiv Tries to Give Democratic Veneer to Armed Belarusian Opposition in Exile

Before the KKR began to break apart in mid-2024 and the remaining KKR fighters were assigned to other fighting units of the Ukrainian armed forces, Ukraine's Belarus policy tended to prioritize actors in the Belarusian opposition that, from the standpoint of Kyiv, not only expressed rhetorical opposition to Russia but also engaged in military action against its aggression. The KKR fit the bill, having fought alongside Kyiv against Russia since March 2022.

Ukraine attempted to control the KKR from the start of the war in 2022, as called for in the Yaremenko approach, not only militarily but also politically. Under the aegis of its Main Directorate of Intelligence, known as HUR, Kyiv regularly hosted "conferences" with both wings of the Belarusian opposition in exile. The last meeting of this kind, called Road to Freedom, took place in Kyiv in November 2023. These conferences appeared to be intended to give the KKR a "democratic" public image. That was complicated by the fact

that some of its members originated in right-wing nationalist circles, plaguing the KKR's reputation. Meanwhile, leaders of the opposition in exile, such as Tsikhanouskaya, were not explicitly unwelcome, but they were not officially invited either.

Tsikhanouskaya has emphasized in several interviews that she is ready to travel to Kyiv at any time, but diplomatic protocol requires Kyiv to issue an official invitation to her as the elected head of state of Belarus. Until recently, Ukraine had avoided following suit, concerned that Minsk might interpret such a move as Kyiv's indirect recognition of Tsikhanouskaya as the president of Belarus; however, according to Tsikhanouskaya's office, Zelensky issued such an invitation to her during what was called by exiled Belarusian media outlets their "first official meeting" in Vilnius in January 2026.

Kyiv's 'Don't Lose Lukashenko' Approach Before Russia's Full-Scale Invasion

The "Don't Lose Lukashenko" approach represents Kyiv's selective engagement with the Lukashenko regime, which remains evident today and is driven by realpolitik considerations. The goal is to prevent Lukashenko from going completely over to the Russian side. Here I shall briefly examine only the political motivations for why Kyiv avoids too close an association with the Belarusian democratic forces (there are humanitarian and economic motivations as well). At the same time, the evolution of Kyiv's policy toward Minsk since the Maidan Revolution in 2013–2014 also shows the gradual departure from the Yaremenko approach as described above, because it does not entail "technical" engagement by the Ukrainian government with the Lukashenko regime.

Going back to the Maidan Revolution and the Kremlin's first war against Ukraine, Minsk has served as a venue for mediation efforts between Kyiv and Moscow. This has allowed Lukashenko not only to rehabilitate his reputation among Western states but also to earn laurels with the Ukrainian public. Consequently, the Belarusian autocrat enjoyed high favorability ratings in Ukrainian polls, becoming the most popular foreign politician in Ukraine before 2022. This phenomenon also had roots in Lukashenko's refusal to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea.

However, amid the wave of protests that erupted in Belarus in 2020, the Don't Lose Lukashenko approach suddenly faced a major dilemma: Toward whom did Ukraine feel greater solidarity—toward the Lukashenko regime, which for years had been unwilling to recognize Moscow's expansionist policies at Ukraine's expense (primarily out of self-interest, of course), or toward Belarusian civil society, which, like many Ukrainians during Ukraine's two 21st-century revolutions, was defying its rulers?

Ukraine chose a middle path: On the one hand, it did not officially recognize the rigged results of the 2020 Belarusian presidential election; on the other hand, it distanced itself from the Belarusian opposition movement. In addition, Ukraine participated in the first EU sanctions package against Minsk in October 2020; however, it did not join subsequent EU sanctions packages. Both Belarusian camps met Kyiv's diplomatic dualism negatively:

Lukashenko saw it as ingratitude and betrayal, while the Belarusian democratic forces met Kyiv's approach with incomprehension.

Kyiv's 'Don't Lose Lukashenko' Approach After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion

Since Russia's full-scale invasion, in which Belarus provided logistical support to the Kremlin, Kyiv has mostly stuck to its policy toward Minsk. The realpolitik imperative of the hour is, first, not to provoke Lukashenko into intervening directly, with Belarusian troops, in Ukraine, and second, not to weaken the Lukashenko regime to the point of collapse. In that scenario, one cannot rule out that the Kremlin might "absorb" Belarus and (again) use the over-1,000-kilometer-long Belarus-Ukraine border to menace Ukraine. At the beginning of the war, Lukashenko was, therefore, again allowed by Kyiv to serve as a mediator. The fact that in the co-aggressor state of Belarus, delegations from Ukraine and Russia met for negotiations shortly after the outbreak of the war on February 28, and then twice more in March 2022, was viewed critically by the exiled Belarusian opposition, since its lobbying in the West focused at that time on the complete international isolation of the Lukashenko regime.

Overall, Kyiv has refrained from severing diplomatic relations with Minsk. The then-Ukrainian ambassador, Ihor Kyzym, was not recalled from Belarus after the war broke out. At the same time, according to Kyzym, Ukraine offered to evacuate the Belarusian embassy in Kyiv to Lviv. When Minsk rejected the offer, citing security reasons, the then-Belarusian ambassador to Ukraine, Igor Sokol, was personally brought to the Ukraine-Belarus border by Ukrainian security forces.

(Note that in November 2025, Kyzym reflected on February 2022 and Ukraine's Belarus policy since then. He claims that the presidential office took over most of the responsibility for Belarus policy from the Foreign Ministry in the very early days of the war. If true, this would again seem to confirm domestically criticized centralization tendencies under the Zelensky administration, which were in effect even before Russia's current war.)

In parallel, the Tsikhanouskaya team has alleged that Kyiv has been lobbying Western governments on behalf of the Lukashenko regime since the beginning of the war. Among other claims, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry is allegedly responsible for stopping a tighter Western sanctions policy against Belarus. Kyiv categorically denies these allegations. Meanwhile, in May and August 2023, the then-head of HUR, Kyrylo Budanov, and Lukashenko, respectively, personally stated that contacts between Kyiv and Minsk continued. In December 2025, Zelensky admitted that lines of communication remain intact.

A Sudden Shift?

Although some commentators have euphorically portrayed the January 25, 2026, meeting between Zelensky and Tsikhanouskaya as a fundamental shift in Kyiv's stance in favor of

the opposition in Belarus, the release of Belarusian political prisoners via Ukrainian territory in December 2025 revealed that the current regime in Minsk no longer rejects contact between Kyiv and its own dissidents. As long as Kyiv welcomes Tsikhanouskaya as a private individual or "political activist" —not as an official representative of Belarus— it is unlikely to raise concerns or suspicions in Minsk.

What makes the December 2025 prisoner release so intriguing is that the leading pro-Russia figures in Babaryka and Kalesnikava—the two most internationally famous members of the Belarusian opposition, alongside Tsikhanouskaya—were released from custody and sent to Germany via Ukrainian territory. If pro-Kremlin sentiment were to gain momentum within the opposition's political wing, it could widen the movement's internal cracks and, to some degree, even turn Belarusian dissidents into an additional security challenge for Ukraine (and Lukashenko). Paradoxically, this would create a new point of intersection between Kyiv, Lukashenko, and the Tsikhanouskaya camp, since all three might suddenly feel threatened by the same "new" political actors. That the opposition is susceptible to such internal conflicts following the release of key figures who do not follow the political line of the United Transitional Cabinet was demonstrated by the release of Tsikhanouskaya's husband, Sergei Tikhanovsky, in June 2025. His erratic actions and solo political games have destabilized the Belarusian opposition and underscored its fragility. From this perspective, Kyiv's softened stance toward Tsikhanouskaya in January 2026 could be seen as a preemptive measure to strengthen the Belarusian opposition's pro-European branch.

Nonetheless, this analysis expects Kyiv to continue its diplomatic dualism in relation to Belarus. The appointment of Budanov as the new head of the presidential office in Ukraine on January 2, 2026, suggested opportunities both for Belarusian dissidents, for whom Budanov represents Zelensky's longtime curator of Ukraine's policy toward the Belarusian opposition, and for Minsk, for which the former military intelligence chief represents a man who speaks the lingo of Belarus' powerful security apparatus (*siloviki*).

Conclusion: 'Don't Lose Lukashenko' Is Not a Strategy

This analysis of the complicated relationship between the Ukrainian government and Belarusian dissidents reveals Kyiv's strategic ambiguity toward the Belarusian political opposition in exile. It also provides a clearer picture of Kyiv as an international political actor. Despite (or even because of) its efforts to build an image as a bastion of liberal democracy and liberal-democratic values in Europe, Kyiv has managed to pursue, in parallel, an ambiguous approach toward the Belarusian opposition in exile, illustrating that it can act in opposition to such values for pragmatic reasons. For the West, this means not to overlook this feature when dealing with Ukraine.

Kyiv's "Don't Lose Lukashenko" approach, which prioritizes the status quo in Belarusian domestic politics, actually points to the lack of a broader strategy. It leaves Kyiv vulnerable to political developments in a post-Lukashenko Belarus, which could be

determined primarily by "black knights" such as Russia. Moscow has for decades cultivated levers of influence within the centers of political power in Belarus (especially the Belarusian security apparatus), which could give the Kremlin an edge in gaining a friendly regime in Belarus in "the first hours" of the post-Lukashenko era—to the detriment of Ukraine. However, relying entirely on the Belarusian opposition's political wing is unlikely to be a panacea, since it lacks sufficient leverage in Belarus to counter Russia's influence after Lukashenko.